

THE SOURCEBOOK SURVEY 2010

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This document details the results of an internet-based survey conducted from November 2010 to the start of January 2011 to quantitatively measure opinions about sourcebooks in the homeschool debate community. The data reveal clear preferences, but also a remarkable homogeneity across categories; with a few notable exceptions, sourcebooks were simply “good”, “bad”, or “average”, with only minor differentiation between specific strong and weak points.

Introduction

Prior public information concerning sourcebooks in the homeschool debate community has principally come from three main sources: the sourcebook publishers, informal discussions, and information tabulated by third parties. While some concerted effort has been made to quantitatively compare the *contents* and *cost* of sourcebooks (see Appendix B), attempts to quantitatively compare *opinions* about sourcebooks have been limited to informal one-category polls (see again Appendix B.)

This survey is an attempt to help close this information gap. From November 2010 to the start of January 2011, responses was collected from debaters nationwide to determine the zeitgeist of sourcebook preferences in the homeschool debate community (see Data, Methods, and Limitations.) The data reveal clear preferences, but also a remarkable homogeneity across categories; with a few notable exceptions, sourcebooks were simply “good”, “bad”, or “average”, with only minor differentiation between specific strong and weak points.

Summary of Results

In all, just over a hundred debaters ranked the sourcebooks they owned in 6 categories: Overall Favorite, Most Useful, Best Content, Best Evidence, Best Sources, and Best Formatting. When combining all categories, Ethos and COG 2010 were ranked highest overall; the difference between the two was not statistically significant. QuickStart came in third, followed by Blue Book Advanced, Thesis, Impact, and Blue Book, the four of which were too close to distinguish statistically. Blue Book Lite and Source came in together at the bottom.

In general, sourcebook's rankings were surprisingly consistent across categories, with a few notable exceptions. The most prominent departures were in Best Formatting, where COG 2010 took first by a clear margin and Thesis took last. (Despite a history of complaints, Ethos's formatting fell squarely in the middle.) QuickStart ranked near the top in all areas except Best Sources, where it was a little below average. In general, Blue Book Advanced ranked marginally higher than Blue Book in all categories except Best Formatting, but the difference between the two was never statistically significant.

The average respondent owned 3 sourcebooks. The most common sourcebook among respondents was Ethos, followed by Source, Blue Book, and COG 2010. This is not necessarily an accurate representation of the general population of debaters due to sampling limitations.

Data, Methods, and Limitations

Sample

Data came from an internet-based survey. Because traditional random sampling would be prohibitively difficult in the widely-spread debater community, a voluntary-response model was used. The survey was publicized via a variety of word-of-mouth and bulletin board social networks to maximize sample variety.

While it is difficult to determine the precise demographics of the sample population due to the word-of-mouth publicity model, it can be assumed to consist primarily of those debaters who are active on debate social networks and fora. As a result, the average experience level of the sample may be higher than the national average. This may actually be desirable, since the opinions of advanced debaters can carry more practical weight.

Response

Respondents were asked to state which sourcebooks they owned and then rank each of them from first to last in six categories: Overall Favorite, Most Useful, Best Content, Best Evidence, Best Sources, and Best Formatting. The nine sourcebooks considered in the survey were Blue Book, Blue Book Advanced, Blue Book Lite, COG 2010, Ethos, Impact, QuickStart, Source, and Thesis. (At the time of the survey's launch in November 2010, Blue Book Midseason had not yet been released.)

The six questions were listed on the survey website as follows:

1. "Of the sourcebooks you have, which is your overall favorite? (Note: If you have Source, don't consider its price in making your selection; since it's free, it has mathematically infinite value for the money, making the results somewhat useless. Treat it as though you paid an equivalent amount for it as you did your other sourcebooks.)"
2. "Of the sourcebooks you have, which do you think will be the most useful? (for example, win you the most rounds)"
3. "Of the sourcebooks you have, which has the best content? (briefs and arguments - evidence is separate, below.)"
4. "Of the sourcebooks you have, which has the best evidence?"
5. "Of the sourcebooks you have, which has the best sources?"
6. "Of the sourcebooks you have, which has the best formatting?"

Limitations

Due to the voluntary-response design, the data cannot be considered to be a strict simple random sample (SRS), although this analysis treats it as such. As a result, the confidence intervals (margins of error) given are not mathematically robust as predictors of the true

population means. In other words, the results are not necessarily representative of the entire debate community.

For all statistical analysis, 95% confidence intervals are used; likewise, statistical significance is measured to $\alpha = 0.05$. Due to the comparatively low sample size, many minor variations are not statistically significant. Distributions of results are assumed to be approximately Normal, although this is not always strictly true; however, n is large enough that the t -procedures for confidence intervals should be robust.

It is likely that there is some level of data pollution in the sample. In preparation for processing, several dozen illegitimate records were removed from the database, including:

1. Double votes;
2. Votes that were subsequently revised;
3. Votes that selected no sourcebooks;
4. Votes that selected sourcebooks, but didn't answer the questions;
5. Several sets of fishy “agenda votes” that appeared to exist solely to promote a specific sourcebook (for example, several identical votes that claimed to have all nine sourcebooks, listed the same arbitrary sourcebook first in every category, and ranked the rest in a specific, very non-standard way.) Since filtering “fishy” votes is an inherently subjective process, suspicious records were generally given the benefit of the doubt, but some were sufficiently unusual to warrant rejection.

There are other objective reasons to believe that the data set is not “clean”. For example, there is strong (undisclosed) evidence that multiple respondents claimed they had sourcebooks that they did not. Although all efforts have been made to minimize such problems, some bias may remain.

Sample Distribution

For all respondents, the mean (average) number of sourcebooks owned was 3.42 ± 0.33 (with 95% confidence; $\sigma = 1.73$.) The median number of sourcebooks owned in the sample was 3. Figure 1 (below right) displays the distribution as a histogram.

The most popular sourcebook among respondents was Ethos, at 82% ownership, followed by Source (59%), Blue Book (53%), and COG 2010 (43%). (See Figure 2, below.) It is interesting to note that more respondents owned Ethos than Source, despite the fact that Source can be freely downloaded from the NCFCA website. Presumably this is due to a strong Stoa presence in the sample.

Estimations of ownership in the general population have not been attempted, as ownership distribution among the sample is expected to be strongly dependent on the social fora in which the survey was marketed. (For example, Blue Book anecdotally appears

Histogram of Number of Sourcebooks Owned

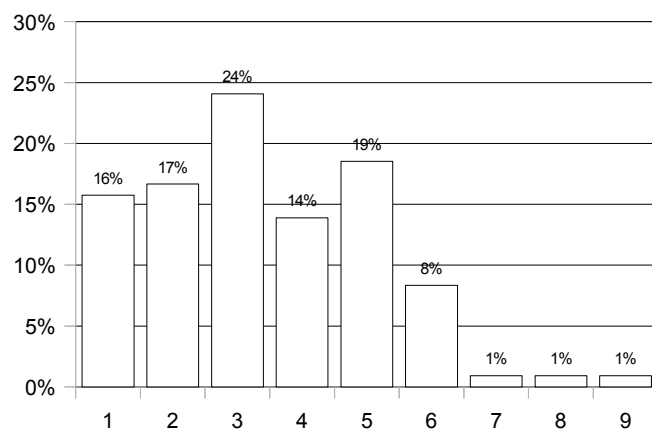


Figure 1: Histogram of Number of Sourcebooks Owned

less popular among users of HomeSchoolDebate.com than among the general debater population; HomeSchoolDebate.com was one of the primary publicity avenues for this poll.)

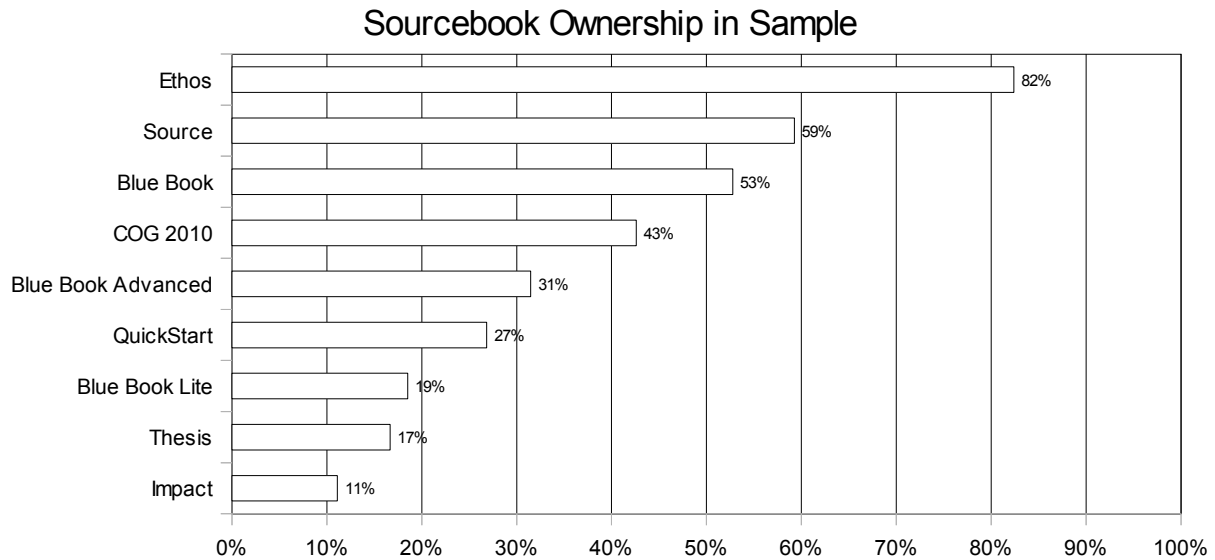


Figure 2: Sourcebook Ownership in Sample

Comprehensive Mean Rankings

General results

The primary purpose of this survey was to determine debater's preferences in six different categories (see Data, Methods, and Limitations.) The table below (Table 1) summarizes the results. In each category, respondents ranked the sourcebooks they owned from first to last; in this table, their choices have been scaled from 1 (first choice) to 0 (last choice.) For example, if the respondent had 5 sourcebooks, their first choice would be ranked 1.0, their second choice 0.75, their third choice 0.5, their fourth choice 0.25, and their last choice 0.0. The table displays the mean (average) of all respondents, as well as the combined total for each sourcebook. (Respondents who listed only a single sourcebook have been omitted from these results, as they are not useful for comparisons.)

Sourcebook	Blue Book	BB Advanced	BB Lite	COG 2010	Ethos	Impact	QuickStart	Source	Thesis
Overall Favorite	0.37 ± 0.06	0.45 ± 0.05	0.13 ± 0.04	0.76 ± 0.05	0.84 ± 0.06	0.45 ± 0.07	0.64 ± 0.05	0.12 ± 0.04	0.42 ± 0.07
Most Useful	0.37 ± 0.06	0.41 ± 0.05	0.11 ± 0.03	0.76 ± 0.05	0.84 ± 0.06	0.43 ± 0.07	0.65 ± 0.06	0.15 ± 0.05	0.40 ± 0.07
Best Content	0.38 ± 0.06	0.45 ± 0.05	0.17 ± 0.04	0.73 ± 0.04	0.89 ± 0.05	0.38 ± 0.05	0.50 ± 0.06	0.12 ± 0.04	0.51 ± 0.08
Best Evidence	0.39 ± 0.06	0.45 ± 0.05	0.14 ± 0.04	0.72 ± 0.05	0.88 ± 0.05	0.40 ± 0.06	0.57 ± 0.06	0.13 ± 0.05	0.42 ± 0.07
Best Sources	0.41 ± 0.06	0.48 ± 0.05	0.19 ± 0.04	0.78 ± 0.04	0.87 ± 0.05	0.40 ± 0.06	0.40 ± 0.06	0.11 ± 0.04	0.45 ± 0.08
Best Formatting	0.55 ± 0.06	0.53 ± 0.06	0.29 ± 0.05	0.85 ± 0.05	0.54 ± 0.08	0.43 ± 0.04	0.68 ± 0.07	0.20 ± 0.06	0.31 ± 0.06
<i>Average</i>	0.41 ± 0.03	0.46 ± 0.04	0.17 ± 0.04	0.77 ± 0.03	0.81 ± 0.03	0.42 ± 0.07	0.57 ± 0.05	0.14 ± 0.02	0.42 ± 0.08

Table 1: Mean Rankings by Category

Figure 3 (below) displays the combined average rankings in a chart form. Ethos and COG 2010 come in on top; Ethos is marginally higher, but the difference is not statistically significant. QuickStart comes in just above Blue Book Advanced, Thesis, Impact, and Blue Book, the four of which are not significantly different from each other. Blue Book Lite and Source are significantly lower than any of the others, but not significantly different from each other.

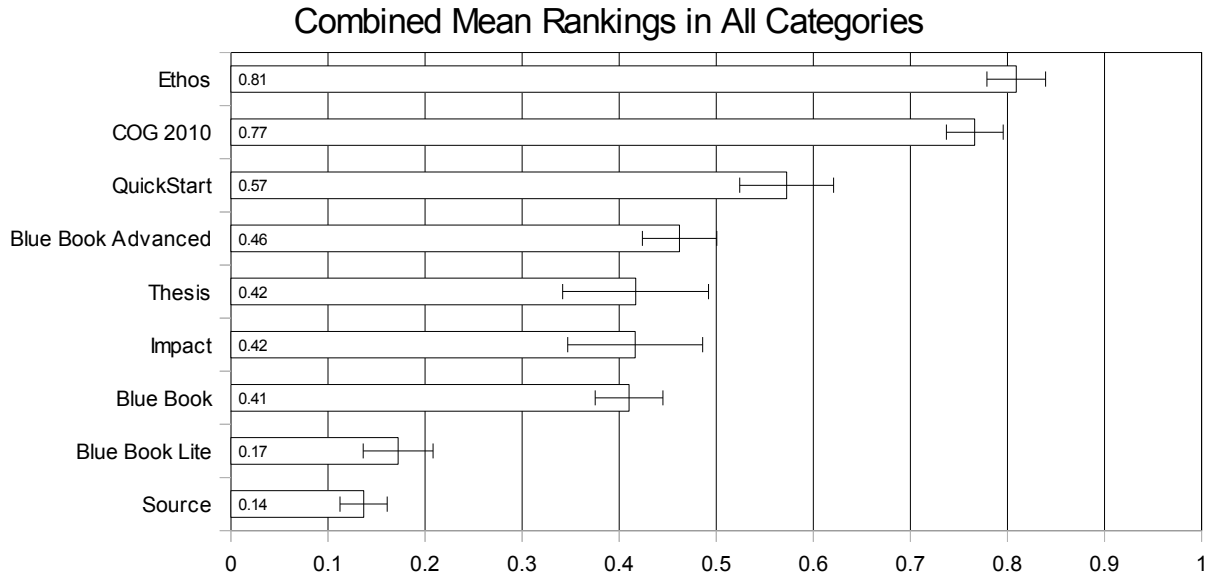


Figure 3: Combined Mean Rankings in All Categories

The accuracy of the mean ranking

Simply combining the mean rankings has two major deficiencies. First, the combined mean rankings do not differentiate between the different survey categories. For example, the average debater would most likely consider Best Content to be more important than Best Formatting, but the combined mean rankings treat them the same. Second, the combined mean rankings treat all votes the same. For example, a first-place ranking from two sourcebooks is treated the same as a first-place ranking from six sourcebooks, although they have different significance.

These deficiencies would seem to necessitate more complex weighted breakdowns, but due to the homogeneity of the data in this case, the breakdowns would be nearly identical to the unweighted combined means and are therefore unnecessary.

Breakdown by category

Examining the data category by category reveals a remarkable homogeneity in the results. For Overall Favorite and Most Useful, the results are statistically identical to the combined means. In almost all other cases, the groupings are very similar. With a few notable exceptions, it appears that public opinion usually considers individual sourcebooks to be simply “good”, “bad”, or “average”, without detailed considerations of each sourcebook's strong and weak points. This may reflect a simple mindset when approaching sourcebooks, or may indicate that sourcebooks are, in reality, generally homogeneous across categories (that is, if a sourcebook is “good” in one area, it is likely to be “good” in other areas.)

Overall, several consistent trends are apparent. Ethos and COG 2010 maintain a lock on the top two places in every category except Best Formatting. (For Best Content, Best Evidence, and Best Sources, Ethos beats out COG 2010 to a statistically significant degree, but not for Overall Favorite and Most Useful.) Blue Book, Blue Book Advanced, Impact, and Thesis generally cluster in a statistically-indistinguishable group in the center of the rankings. In all but one case (Best Formatting), Blue Book Lite and Source take last.

QuickStart is a minor anomaly. In all but one case, QuickStart takes third (or second), just below Ethos and COG 2010, although it is not always statistically distinguishable from the

center group. The only notable departure is for Best Sources, where QuickStart takes sixth, squarely in the central cluster.

The only category in which Ethos does not take the top spot is Formatting, which goes to COG 2010 by a clear margin. Surprisingly, despite a history of anecdotal complaints about Ethos's "terrible" formatting, it falls solidly in the middle, statistically indistinguishable from QuickStart, Blue Book, and Blue Book Advanced. Unexpectedly, last place goes to Thesis, although its difference from Source and Blue Book Lite is not significant.

Individually, these appear to be each sourcebook's perceived strong and weak points:

Blue Book: Very average; marginally higher in sources and formatting

Blue Book Advanced: Very average, but usually marginally higher than Blue Book

Blue Book Lite: Very low in all areas except formatting, which is marginally higher

COG 2010: Very high overall; slightly lower in content/evidence, clearly best formatting

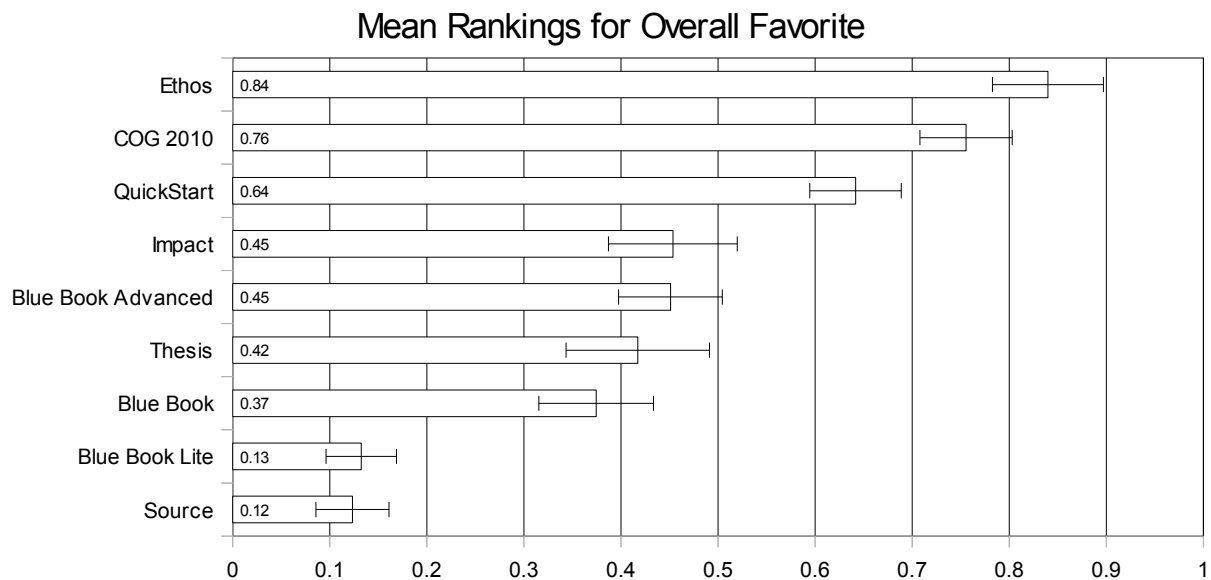
Ethos: Very high in all areas except formatting

Impact: Very average; marginally lower in formatting

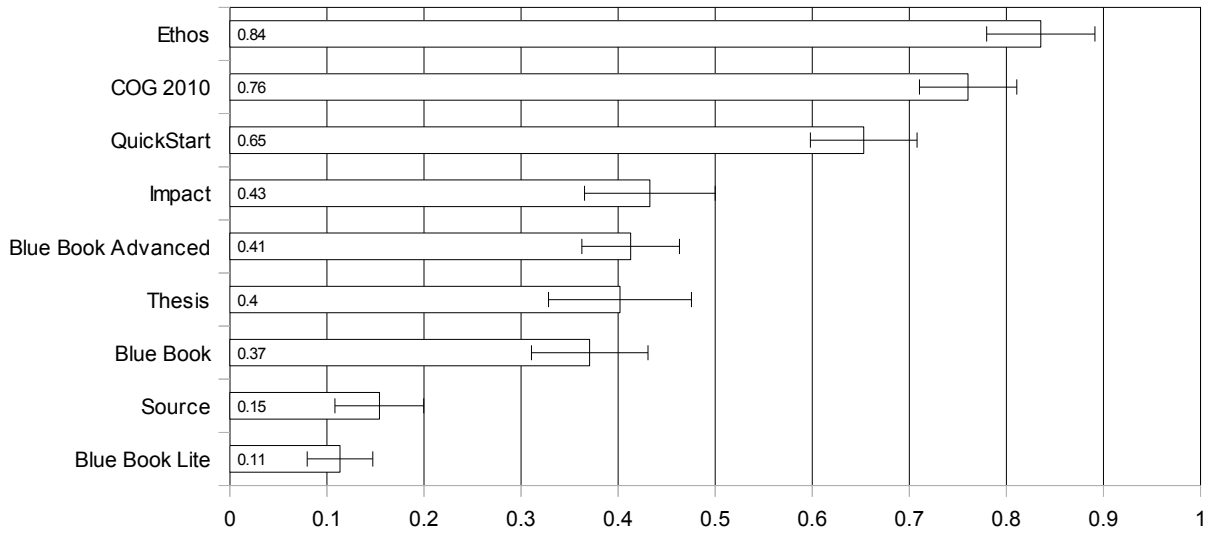
QuickStart: Moderately high in all areas except sources, where it is low-average

Source: Very low in all areas

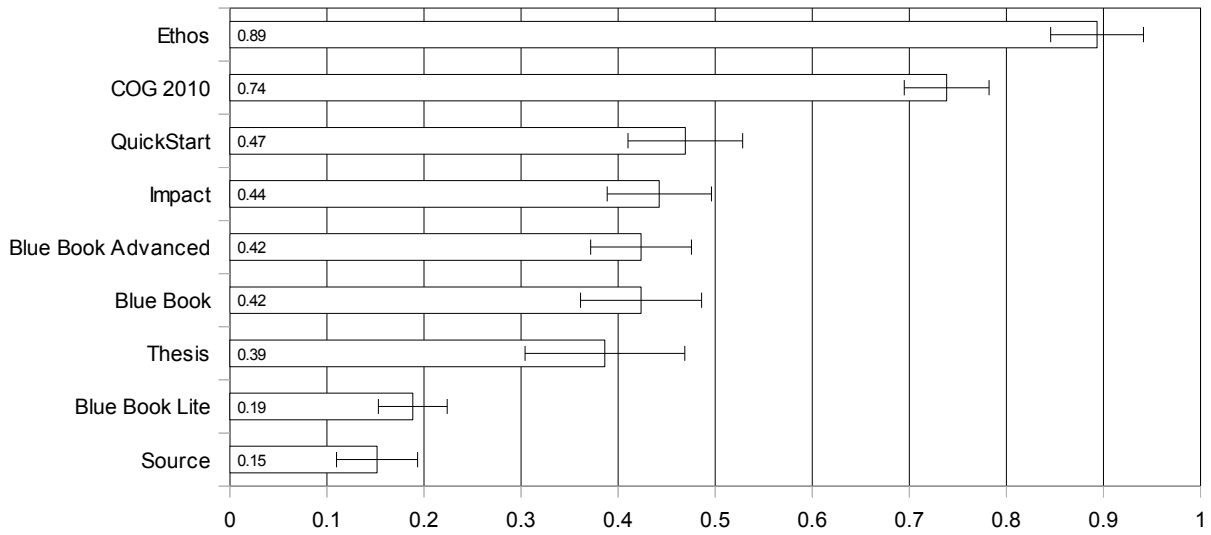
Thesis: Low-average overall; bottom in formatting



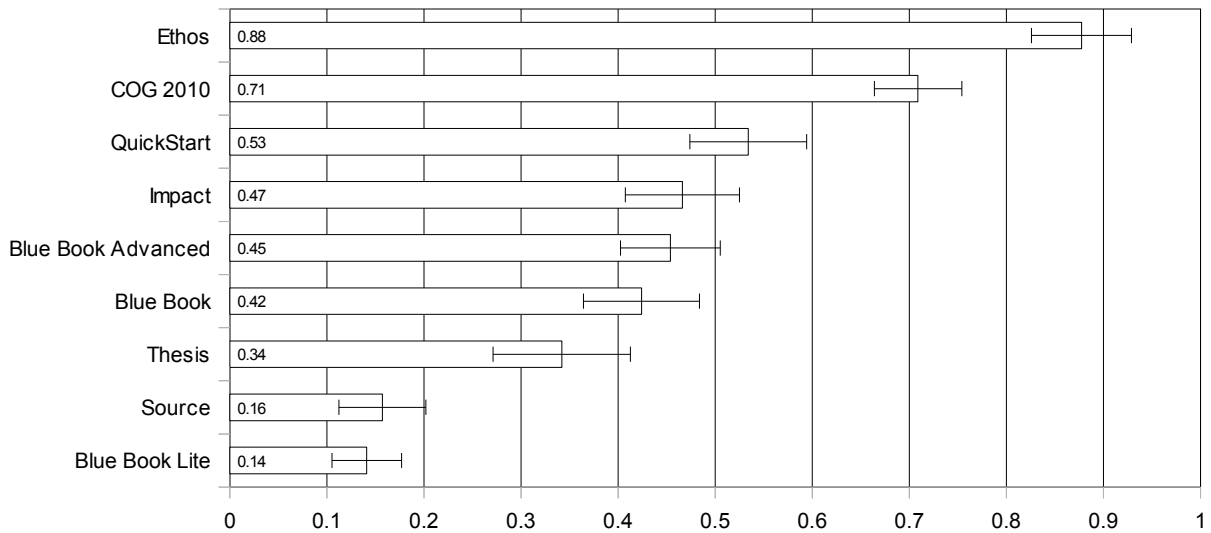
Mean Rankings for Most Useful

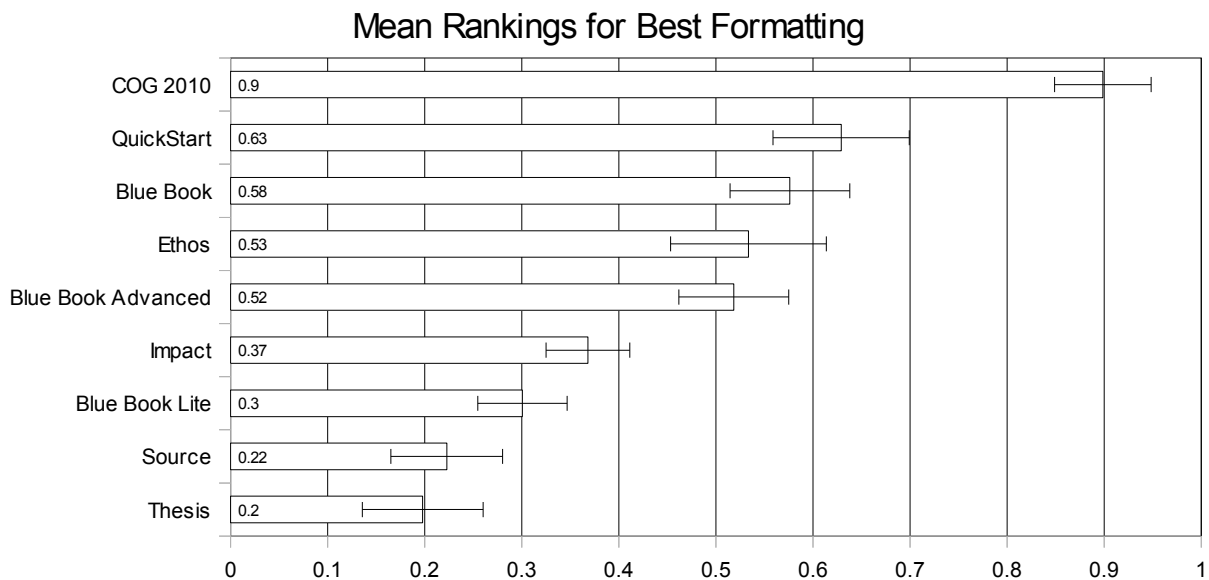
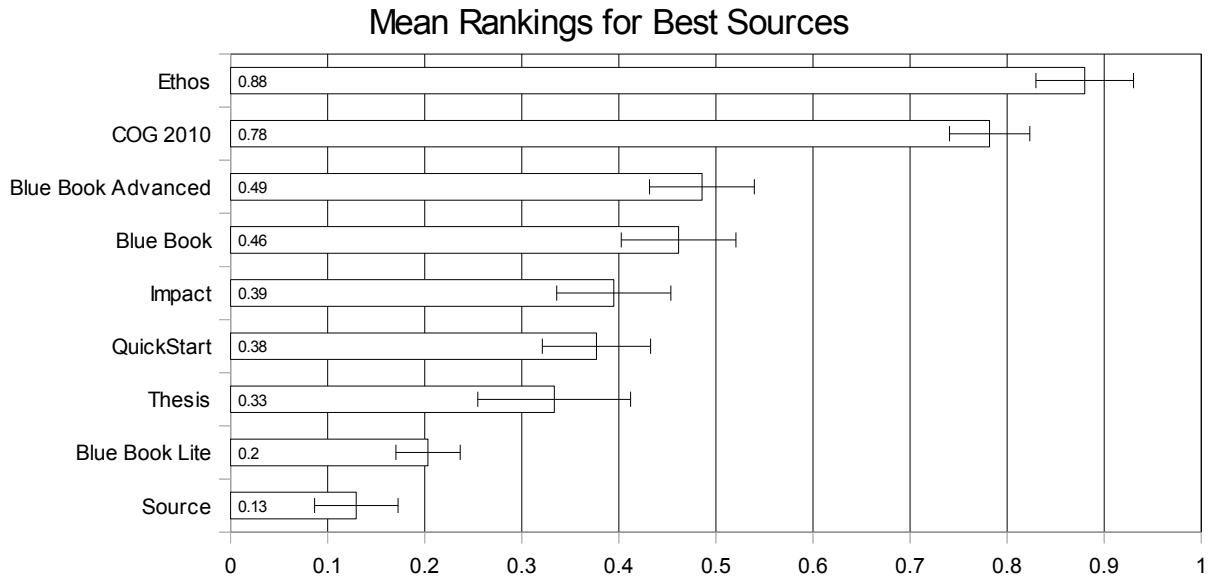


Mean Rankings for Best Content



Mean Rankings for Best Evidence





Appendix A: Sourcebook Information

The nine sourcebooks considered in this poll may all be purchased by the general debate community for the 2010-2011 season (with the exception of Source, which is only available to affiliates of the NCFCA.) For further information on each of the sourcebooks, refer to the websites specified in the following list:

Blue Book: Released August 2010. Cases and negative briefs. \$54.95, 36 briefs, 280 pages. Printed copies available from monumentpublishing.biz.

Blue Book Advanced: Released August 2010. Negative briefs and generics. \$59.95, 42 briefs, 225 pages. Printed copies available from monumentpublishing.biz.

Blue Book Lite: Released August 23, 2010. Cases, negative briefs, and generics. \$29.95, 21 briefs, 112 pages. Printed copies available from monumentpublishing.biz.

COG 2010: Released September 1, 2010. Exclusively generic briefs. \$25.00, 66 briefs, 446 pages. Digital copies available from cogdebate.com; printed copies from lulu.com.

Ethos: Released September 17, 2010. Cases, negatives, generics, and articles. \$35.00, 103 briefs, 2,640 pages. Digital copies available from ethosdebate.com.

Impact: Released September 29, 2010. Affirmative and negative briefs. \$15.00, 33 briefs, 236 pages. Digital copies available from sites.google.com/site/impactdebate.

QuickStart: Released August 1, 2010. Affirmative and negative briefs. \$29.99, about 40 briefs, about 350 pages. Digital copies available from quickstartdebate.com.

Source: Released August 18, 2010. Cases, negative briefs, and generics. Free, 52 briefs, 607 pages. Digital copies available to NCFCA affiliates at ncfcaregistration.com.

Thesis: Released September 1, 2010. Cases, negative briefs, and generics. \$24.99, 29 briefs, 400 pages. Digital copies available from sites.google.com/site/whatisyourthesis.

Appendix B: Past Analyzes

Content analyzes

The most comprehensive content analysis to date has been Daniel Gaskell's source tabulations, which can be viewed at cogdebate.com/comparison.php. More comprehensive numerical breakdowns for the 2010-2011 season can be viewed in the HomeSchoolDebate.com post at www.homeschooldebate.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=7&t=10610#p332890.

A complete catalogue of sourcebook pricing and contents is also available on HSD, at www.homeschooldebate.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=7&t=10610. (See also Appendix A.)

Opinion analyzes

Several quantitative analyzes of sourcebook opinions have been carried out in the past, mostly informal “which do you like best?” polls on HomeSchoolDebate.com. The following is a partial list:

“Sourcebook Reviews”, 2007-2008 season (illegal immigration): <http://www.homeschooldebate.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=40&t=870>. This poll asked users which sourcebooks they would recommend purchasing; all major sourcebooks were featured.

“Favorite Sourcebook”, 2008-2009 season (India): <http://www.homeschooldebate.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=41&t=5749>. This poll was straight-favorite; notably, only Blue Book, QuickStart, and Ethos were listed, although other sourcebooks existed.

A straight-favorite poll was conducted on HomeSchoolDebate.com for the 2009-2010 season, the results of which are no longer available.